

Book review: Africa in Global International Relations: Emerging Approaches to Theory and Practice (2016)

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Book Review

Africa in Global International Relations: Emerging Approaches to Theory and Practice, edited by Paul-Henri Bischof, Kwesi Aning and Amitav Acharya, London and New York, Routledge Studies in African Politics and International Relations, 2016, 180 pp., US\$53.95, ISBN 978-1-13-890981-6

Reviewed By: Tadie Degie Yigzaw

This book is important and timely in filling the gap of international relations literature, which is dominated by Western tradition, through investigating the meaning and implications of non-Western world, particularly the experience of Africa. In doing so, a team of 11 contributors have authored an anthology “*Africa in Global International Relations: Emerging Approaches to Theory and Practice*”. The title of this book is taken from the name of the article of the editors and the idea for this book was conceived during Amitav Acharya’s visit in South Africa as Nelson Mandela visiting professor of International Relations (hereafter IR) during January 2012 to June 2013. In May 2013, the international conference ‘African Voices in the New International Relations Theory’ was held at Rhodes University, South Africa. The conference aim was to discuss the marginalization of Africa in the IR discipline and theory and how this issue can be addressed in the context of the emerging global IR paradigm. As a result of this conference the volume emerged and offered a comprehensive perspective from Africa.

In this volume, each author takes a critical look at existing IR paradigms and offers unique perspectives from Africa. The book elucidates African scholars experience and Western theorization on Africa and it explains the growth of African agency, its success in creating new allies with emerging powers, as well as in strengthening old relations within Western partners. The continent plays key roles in the area of climate change, world trade, migration, security and terrorism. Nonetheless, African countries continues to be marginalized in IR theories and characterized as “the other”. Scholars in the periphery are mostly just consumers of theoretical advances of scholars in the forefront of the field. The forefront ignores African’s history and reality in the study of IR and this gap led to the contributors in pursuit of a truly inclusive theories of IR.

The volume is an important contribution to the political science literature in African studies. It serves as an example for Africa having become a source of theoretical and conceptual innovation for current studies in IRs. However, much of it is downplayed by the dominant Western-American-centric IR perspectives. The volume is a compelling critical voice from Africa that highlights the deficiencies of the contemporary IR discipline and traditional theories. It is structured into nine major chapters. In the first chapter, the editors reveal the narrow Euro-American-centric framing of mainstream IR theories and argue that “the main current theories of IR, namely: realism, liberalism, and partly constructivism, are deeply rooted in...the history, intellectual tradition and agency claims of the West to accord little more than a marginal place to those of the non-Western world” (p. 2). In response, they call for the development of a new paradigm of IR theory, Global IR, which develops a more global, open and inclusive approach. For the authors, Global IR does

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not dismiss existing theories of IR but challenges them to rethink their assumption and broaden their scope. For instance, realism should go beyond power politics and acknowledges other sources of agency such as norms, cultures and ideas that helps for cooperation. Global IR calls for reorienting the dominant theories of IR and ground them in African history, ideas, institutions and intellectual practices. As Bleiker (2001) long argued, voicing critique alone does not suffice but advancing existing theories and replacing with alternative ones. The authors insist that Global IR gives center stage to African regions and recognizes the value of African agency in theorizing International Relation Theory (hereafter IRT).

In the next chapter, Ahmed Ali Salem argues that IR that arise in the non-Western world (e.g. Africa) are not considered as part of mainstream IRT, albeit they can provide original contributions to the discipline. Therefore, mainstream IR approaches are not working universally when applied to the world beyond the West including Africa. The author clarifies this deficit by tracing some tangible examples from North Africa to the realist and constructivist approaches, such as failing realism and constructivism in explaining Arab League Collective Security Actions. He argues that in order for IRT to become truly universal, it needs to enrich itself by African epistemologies and experiences. But precisely how this shall happen is not explained.

In chapter 3, Heidi Hudson inspects how Africa's agential role as a legitimate producer of IR theory is undervalued. For the author the politics of every-day needs to be theorized in order to be able to provide a right description of the world to ordinary people. African's lived experience, particularly those of women struggling against multiple insecurities ought to serve as a means to inform, change and transcend existing theoretical approaches and she argued that "making feminist sense of IR in Africa can serve to reveal latent or hidden theoretical contributions and agency (p.56)."

In the following chapter, Candice Moore stresses the significance of inclusivity and its centrality for Global IR. The necessity of incorporating authentic voices from Africa in relation to social, political, economic, intellectual factors in order to develop such an inclusive approach is explained. This, it is argued, would enhance a greater reflectivism of the world beyond the West, while broadening the scope of the discipline further beyond the Westphalian model of states. She insists, this would contribute towards abandoning Euro-centric theorizing in IR.

Chapter 5, written by Lesley Blaauw argues that Africa lacks agency in international relations even though Africa's participation in IR can be traced back to "the slave trade; the scramble for Africa; the proxy wars of the Cold War; and the increasing value of the continent's natural resources"(p. 85). Despite the aforementioned, African countries are still not considered useful unit of analysis primarily because of the focus of international relations on great powers. For the author, the imposition of the state in Africa and the contested notion of sovereignty are the key reasons to explain Africa's lack of agency in international relations.

In the subsequent chapter, Jo-Ansie van Wyk recounts the key contributions Africa has made to IR: the continent was the first that declare itself a nuclear weapons free zone; it led the global

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campaign against apartheid; it reasserted its capacity to act as a balance between the West and the East during the Cold War and between the West and China even today; African agency is also evident in the provision of security and the role of the continent in the global war on terror; Africa refused to host the United States' Africa Command (AFRICOM); African agency is discernable in South-South groupings such as BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and IBSA (India, Brazil and South Africa) and Africa has adopted the Ezulweni Consensus on UN reform. The motto "African solutions for African problems" (p. 108 & 113) indicates that the continent's determination to be self-reliant. Nonetheless, Africa has been a victim and bystander in IR theory which requires urgent rectification.

In chapter 7, Gerrie Swart explores Africa Union's recent response on the intervention of NATO politics in the specific case of Libya. His assessment exposes Western dominance but the author fails to critically engage with AU's approach.

Chapter 8, written by Kwesi Aning and Nacy Annan it is argued that African's marginalization in IR discourses characterizes it as the 'other' (Salami, 2016). Africa's critical contribution in IR has been neglected and insufficient attention has been paid to the shortfalls of the discipline itself.

Finally, in chapter 9, Tim Murithi provides a case for bridging the gap between the pan-African school and the dominant theories of contemporary IR but the account remains utopian. The author focuses on the development of a new 'paradigm of IRT that is global, open, inclusive and capable the voices of all by stressing the significance of pan-Africanism as Claassen (2011) did before him.

To conclude, this volume is in pursuit of developing IR theories that explain how the world works in a more universal and truthful way and demonstrates aptly how mainstream IR theories have failed to do so due to Eurocentric notions of culture, agency and institutions. Ultimately the volume proposes a global IR as an alternative discipline and as a remedy for a biased Western-American-centric IR theory. Although most authors convincingly take issue with conventional theorizing in IR display how dominant IR theories are not capture the realities of Africa and include new methodological approaches, the volume's weakness is that most contributors follow a reductionist approach in their process of theorization. The authors highlight African's marginalization in IR theory by the West, but I would like to argue that African's marginalization is also a self-imposed since Africa has been a bystander in IR, particularly, in knowledge production and academic contributions to the core of the discipline. I am wondering about the guaranty that the proposed global IR would not run into the same pitfalls as current dominant IR theories. To strengthen and refine the volume, I suggest that a global IR project should focus on the experimentation with more specific cases and concrete examples rather than the overall critiques and dichotomization between the West and Africa.

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